



Many Texas politicians receive hefty donations from top donors

By Enrique Rangel | A-J AUSTIN BUREAU

Monday, July 14, 2008

Story last updated at 7/14/2008 - 1:16 am

AUSTIN - Many Texans probably have never heard of James Leininger, Bob Perry or Fred Baron.

For members of the state Legislature, state officials, lobbyists and Capitol watchers, the above names are as familiar as Hannah Montana and Selena Gomez are to millions of school kids. They are the sugar daddies of scores of Texas politicians.

"They are heavyweight political donors," said Craig McDonald, director of Texans for Public Justice, a watchdog group that favors limits on political campaign contributions. "They have given millions of dollars to Texas politicians and to political causes."

In the 2005-06 election cycle, which set a record for political donations because of some hotly contested races, Houston homebuilder Bob Perry distributed more than \$7 million to 143 state candidates, mainly legislators and judges, and San Antonio physician James Leininger dished out \$5.5 million to a smaller number of politicians, McDonald said. Fred Baron, a Dallas trial lawyer, gave \$2.1 million to an even smaller group.

Over the years, Perry and Leininger have given generously, mainly to Republican candidates and GOP causes, while Baron's money has gone mainly to Democrats - he hopes to rebuild the party in Texas, McDonald explained.

Altogether, 141 wealthy Texans - who in some instances, like in Perry's, Leininger's and Baron's cases, list their spouses as contributors - gave a minimum of \$100,000 each for a combined \$51.9 million to candidates, political parties or to social causes, according to a report Texans for Public Justice published last year.

That's not all.

Almost 2,000 political action committees raised \$307 million during the same two-year period, the report said.

"This is outrageous," said John Cobarruvias of Houston, a Democratic Party activist who monitors campaign finance reports in his spare time. "There is so much influence peddling in Austin." Since last year, Cobarruvias has received some attention from the press and Capitol watchers because he has exposed what he considers improper use of campaign funds among some elected officials, including Rep. Carl Isett, R-Lubbock.

Cobarruvias has asked the Texas Ethics Commission and the Travis County District Attorney in Austin, the only DA office in Texas with the authority to investigate state officials accused of corruption, to investigate Isett for allegedly paying his wife, Cheri Isett, for bookkeeping services.

State law prohibits elected officials from using campaign funds to pay relatives for services rendered. So far, neither agency has responded to Cobarruvias' request for an investigation. Isett told The A-J the accusation is politically motivated.

Cobarruvias said in addition to watchdog groups like Texans for Public Justice, people like himself and David Palmer, a California resident who has exposed other officials in Texas and across the nation, are exposing the influence of big money and the misuse of campaign funds among some elected officials because the state government is unwilling to police itself.

Instead of the Ethics Commission, which he calls worthless because it seldom investigates officials accused of wrongdoing, the state ought to have a citizen ethics commission, like one in Colorado, with the authority to investigate the misuse of funds or set limits to campaign contributions, Cobarruvias said.

But some lawmakers don't see any campaign finance reforms approved anytime soon.

"There is a lot of opposition to those bills," said Rep. Delwin Jones, R-Lubbock, whom Leininger targeted for defeat in the Republican primary of 2006. "In every session someone introduces a bill to limit the amount of money a donor can give but most don't even get out of committee."

Jones is one of several maverick Republicans Leininger has long wanted to see defeated because they oppose House Speaker Tom Craddick, R-Midland, and school vouchers. The San Antonio physician has long proposed vouchers as the solution to the state's educational shortcomings.

Ken Hoagland, spokesman for the media-shy Leininger, could not be reached for comment, but in previous interviews, he has said his boss has long been vilified by the press and legislators like Jones.

What the critics don't understand is that Leininger gives generously to candidates who share his philosophy because he cares deeply about the education of Texas' children, especially of low-income minority children who are not getting the education they need in the public school system, Hoagland has said.

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